AID, DEVELOPMENT AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN AFGHANISTAN

by Bernt Glatzer
(Centre of Modern Oriental Studies,
D-13189 Berlin, Prenzlauer Promenade 149)[1]

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News Media and Human Rights

Since September 1996 Afghanistan is back in the world media. Watching the shocking pictures and alarming reports even specialists have problems maintaining a balanced judgement on the events in Afghanistan. The media reports concentrate on the war in and around the capital and on the Taliban's human rights violations, particularly the ban on female education and employment, on women who are forced to stay at home and forbidden to earn an income even if they are the only bread winners of fatherless families, and on other atrocities against women. It seems as if the Taliban are targeting the women of Kabul as their main enemy. No doubt these reports are authentic, and the human rights abuses cannot be explained away by pointing at specific cultural or historic conditions.

Having made this clear I maintain nevertheless that the overall picture the media are painting of Afghanistan is wrong, one-sided and detrimental to efforts to avoid an even greater catastrophe in this ravaged country. It is not true that now Afghans have to fear for their lives more than before, or that men hold their women in lower esteem than before, or that women have lost all their rights, or that bands of stone-age Muslims ("fundamentalists") hold a reign of terror in the country, or that rehabilitation projects already implemented are now in jeopardy. It is sad to say that all the other parties to the conflict since 1978, including the pro-communist regimes, have a human rights record even worse than that of the Taliban (see the Amnesty International reports through all these years). Of course, this does not excuse the Taliban's own atrocities and absurdities.

Kabul and Afghanistan

All sources on Afghanistan through the centuries have stated that what is true for Kabul is not true for the rest of Afghanistan and vice versa. Since ages past Kabul has developed a unique cosmopolitan culture, partly at the cost of its hinterland, but not in connection with it. Many Kabulis feel more at home in the streets of New York, Frankfurt or Moscow than in the villages, steppes and mountains a few miles away from the capital. Proverbial is the terror and fear of Kabulis if they have to enter an Afghan village for the first time. This is matched by the villagers' mistrust of the city people. This distrust has its roots in a long history of arbitrary rule by the central state. The Afghan state has never been able to rule the country throughout, and most Afghans rarely noticed the existence of the state, but where and when the existence of the state was felt it was regarded as unpredictable, arbitrary and unintelligible, like an alien agency. The pro-communist regimes deepened this tradition by their well-meant but misconceived, erratic, unplanned, and for the people enigmatic reform programmes. The military isolation of Kabul since 1980 even further deepened the rift between the capital and its countryside.

The bombardments of Kabul, initially by the troops of Hizb-e Islami and later by the Taliban, and the latter's atrocities in the city, have nothing to do with fundamentalism or Islam but are partly caused by a deep hatred and mistrust of Kabulis by misguided youths from the villages of South Afghanistan and from the refugee camps in Pakistan. When talking with Afghan farmers and rural refugees I usually noticed erotically charged conceptions of Kabul as a Sodom and Gomorrah, the source of all evils of Afghanistan.

mujahedin and Taliban - Alternatives as the People see them

At present I am conducting a survey on Afghans who recently came from Afghanistan to Peshawar. The majority, even non-Pashtuns, express freely their open sympathy for the Taliban, although most of them feel perturbed by the Taliban's rigorous and harsh interpretation of Islam. Interestingly, most of my interviewees oppose the closure of girls' schools and the hanging of Najibullah. But my interview partners stress one all-overriding positive point: the markedly improved security situation in the Taliban controlled areas. This should not come as a surprise: the Afghans are suffering from the longest lasting war in the 20th Century. Open fighting has cost so far more than a million human lives and in addition to this soldiers and bandits from all parties (including the pro-communist governments), and from all ethnic groups, have done everything to surpass each other with horrors and atrocities (murders, rapes and looting) since 1978. And, as if this was not enough, *mujahedin* commanders hampered the rehabilitation of their country by their own looting and corruption.[2]

The fact that these horrors and malpractices have widely stopped now under the Taliban has a tremendous impact on the people's priorities and sympathies. Many think that the Taliban's sick and absurd relationship to women is a secondary problem to be corrected later.

To many or most Afghans the realistic options are reduced to the two not very attractive alternatives:

(a) physical security with reduced personal rights and freedom; or

(b) slightly more personal rights in the cities, but a life in permanent fear of rape, looting and bombardments.

However, in the rural areas these alternatives exist only in theory. In fact, personal rights, particularly those of women have not changed under the Taliban. Girls' schools or job opportunities for women were widely unknown, the take-over of rural ares by the Taliban brought mainly one change: better security.

Causes for the Continuation of Hostilities

There is neither an ethnic war nor a religious one in Afghanistan. The war is about issues of personal power and access to resources of a few and their clienteles, and it is kept alive by various states in the region who compete for control and influence on this strategic geopolitical hub. Ethnic, tribal, and religious identities have secondary and instrumental significance. They serve as protection in an environment where state institutions have broken down, and they serve the political actors as fields of recruitment and as emotional fuel which can be tactically utilized.

According to my long standing experiences in Afghanistan and to other analyses of the war, there is a connection between displacement and impoverishment of people on the one side and their readiness to participate in warfare on the other. In those areas of Afghanistan which have received considerable international aid for rehabilitation, and where the pre-war level of rural production has been restored, people are most weary of war and their readiness to participate in violent actions is lowest. In those areas it was possible much faster than expected to demobilise the *mujahedin* and to re-integrate them in the local economy.

Development of the Economy or Development of the Conflict?

It is not sufficient to restore the rural economy to its pre-war level. The population grows annually by 4 % , i.e. the population inside Afghanistan has at least reached its pre-war size although more than 2 million Afghans still live abroad.[3]

If **all** Afghans are to be fed as modestly as before the war rehabilitation of agriculture and infrastructure is not enough. Development is needed now if there is to be any realistic hope of refugee return and if the refugees are to be peacefully reintegrated and if a further impoverishment of Afghanistan is to be avoided. The alternative, i.e. **not** to initiate development, would mean to perpetuate and to aggravate the Afghan refugee situation in Pakistan, Iran and in Europe for an indefinite time to come (population growth in refugee camps is higher than at home). The consequences of having long-term refugee populations are known from other parts of the world (e.g. Palestine) and are already appearing among the Afghan refugees: viz. the Taliban are a politico-religious radical movement carried by Afghan students of theology in Pakistan. If refugees cannot afford food and education for their sons, and if there is no alternative for vocational training, they send their sons to a *madrasah* (Islamic theological school). This education usually leads to the vocation of *mullah*, a job which is considered socially rather low, but in a refugee situation there is little choice.

It is often argued that the time for effective aid to Afghanistan - i.e. aid for development - is not yet ripe. As the argument goes, first the Afghans have to come to terms with themselves, they have to end the war, to respect human rights, particularly those of the women, and to form a representative government as a credible partner for co-operation. If this should mean development aid as a reward for politically desirable behaviour, it would be far away from the realities. The leaders of the warring factions are interested in military victories and in support of their parties and clients. They couldn't care less for economic development. If the above argument should mean to wait until peace comes by itself, we shall have to wait for a very long time to come. This war will not end by itself and the warlords will not become wise and give in. Even the admirable peace efforts of the UN Special Envoy Dr. Holl will be futile if they are not supported by more economic aid to the already peaceful areas of Afghanistan.

Most parts of Afghanistan are already in peace and relatively stable. The rulers in the provincial capitals may change from time to time, but non-centralized local institutions exist which survive political changes at the top, and which make sustainable rehabilitation and development work possible. Contrary to reports in the media, in several Taliban controlled

areas schooling for girls takes place, women pursue jobs outside the houses in the health sector, and women-oriented projects continue unhampered by the Taliban.[4]

Development work in the peaceful Afghan hinterland can be a useful instrument in helping to end the civil war on Kabul. It will not serve to stop the flow of weapons and funds to the warlords, but it will lead to lower the readiness of the population to participate in the fighting. Even now the warring parties have problems to recruit "enough" fighters. The war on Kabul could be dried out if young men had the chance to participate in a developing Afghan economy, i.e. in an economy which has a future.[5]

All foreign aid is not automatically helpful and conductive to peace. Imbalanced aid can lead to locally felt disadvantages with aggression and new conflicts as a consequence. Senseless dumping of imported food can destroy the market for home grown products and can convince farmers to grow more lucrative products instead, such as opium from which further imports of weapons may be financed.

The time for catastrophe action, for quick-fixes and for other short-winded "aid" to Afghanistan is over. There is no alternative to mid- or long-term planning and work for sustained development, unless one wants to withdraw from this part of the world and leave it alone to a chaotic destiny with incalculable, and probably irrepairable, consequences for Central and South Asia.

Human Rights - A Reason to Withhold Aid from Afghanistan?

Aid for the development of Afghanistan must first of all aim at women and other vulnerable groups and has to insist that human rights are respected by all actors involved, even if this may lead to the cancellation of projects in some areas.[6] On the other hand, it would be wrong to reduce needs and human rights to a single aspect; one human right which has priority even over education and equal job opportunities is the right of life and health. Life expectancy in Afghanistan is one of the lowest in the world and life expectancy of Afghan women is even much lower than that of male Afghans. Can we really cope with this dramatic situation by withholding development aid from Afghanistan, as some demanded when they saw reports of Afghan atrocities in the media?

Notes:

1. The author is social anthropologist who has worked on Afghanistan since 1968 and has published on rural society, political organisation, economy, history and art of the country. He also worked four years for the Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees (DACAAR) in Peshawar and Herat. Recently he worked as consultant for the German GTZ. At present he carries out social anthropological research in Peshawar.

2. An example: Till September 1996 Hajji Qadir was Governor of Nangarhar and Chairman of the all-parties *shora* of Nangarhar, Kunar, and Laghman. He managed to build-up a large and diversified family enterprise with his own airline through appropriation of state property and drug money. In spite if this he was popular with NGOs and other foreigners because he let them work relatively

undisturbed and conversed with them in a friendly manner. However, in Jalalabad's streets and Bazaars, and in the villages, the people's outrage over the Hajji's, his family's and his *shora*'s excesses in corruption and over the deteriorating security situation could be loudly heard. In May 1996 I found that teachers' salaries had not been paid to the teachers since more than six months although the money had been transferred in time from Kabul to the *shora*. It is anyone's guess what the *shora* did with the money.

3. This is a conservative estimate, we have neither reliable population figures for inside Afghanistan, nor for the refugees. UNHCR uses much higher figures for refugees.

4. Information by the Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees (DACAAR) and by Afghan German Basic Education (AG-BASED). An example: In Ghazni Province DACAAR has built a school on request of the local population **after** the Taliban took over, few weeks ago lessons have started successfully with boys going to school in the morning and girls in the afternoon. There are many other examples. It proves that with a skilful approach by an organization the Taliban in the Provinces can show flexibility, and that the radical rhetoric of their spokesmen may give way to a more pragmatic attitude in the country side. It also seems that the Taliban have no consistent ideology and that their perception of Islam is rather ambiguous and fuzzy.

5. Recently it was proposed to impose an international arms embargo on Afghanistan. This seems to me far from the realities: Afghanistan has uncontrollable borders with 6 different states who all have conflicting interests on the country.

6. E.g. UNICEF has cancelled school projects in areas where girls are continuously prevented from going to school. Of course other organizations must not undermine this necessary measure. However, it would make no sense if school programmes were closed in all Afghanistan, because then we would have no means to encourage positive changes and local deviations.